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SUBJECT: CHURCH OF CYPRUS AND COMMUNITY OF SANT'EDIGIO HOST  
INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Political and religious leaders of numerous nations and various faiths gathered in Nicosia November 16-18 at a conference organized by the Roman Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio and hosted/financed by the Church of Cyprus. Despite earlier misgivings that the event could morph into a platform for Archbishop Chrysostomos II and other Church officials to bash Turkey on the Cyprus Question, there was only limited discussion of the "national issue" in the panel sessions, breakout groups and in the Archbishop's opening and closing statements; Turkish Cypriots, while invited to attend, were noticeably absent. Most participants and pundits claimed the conference provided a useful, faith-based political and educational framework to promote inter-cultural dialogue, discuss specific conflicts, and network amongst themselves, although they also criticized the ultra-nationalist Cypriot Archbishop Chrysostomos's "questionable" peacemaker credentials as well as the event's financial cost. A conference highlight was a panel discussion on the situation of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. Sant'Egidio's next interfaith dialogue will take place in Cracow, Poland in 2009. This telegram is a joint effort of Embassies Nicosia and Vatican City. End summary.

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The Organizers and Their Mission  
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¶2. (U) The Community of Sant'Egidio is a lay Catholic association which the Holy See has officially recognized as an ecclesiastical movement. While Sant'Egidio does not speak for the Vatican, it is inspired by social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and has focused on service to the poor and on conflict resolution. The Community estimates a membership of 60,000 volunteers in seventy nations, and is strongest in Italy. Its most prominent conflict resolution success has been mediating an end to the civil war in Mozambique in 1992. In addition to the president of the Republic of Cyprus, the presidents of Albania, Malta and Montenegro attended the conference in Nicosia on November 16-18, as did former FARC hostage in Colombia Ingrid Betancourt, Israel's interior minister, and several Catholic cardinals. The theme for this year's event was "Building a Civilization of Peace, Cultures in Dialogue."

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Cyprus Question Always Just Below the Surface  
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¶3. (U) Kicking off the conference, RoC President Demetris Christofias pled for peace and justice in Cyprus, and referred to the "cruel fate of refugees at the hands of Turkish invaders." He also spoke positively, however, of the efforts he and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat were making to settle the Cyprus Problem. Christofias stressed that in Cyprus there is respect for different religions and

cultures, and "our effort is to send messages from this meeting all over the world for peace in Cyprus and elsewhere." Religion had nothing to do with the present situation here, the President claimed, and a settlement must serve all the island's populations: ethnic Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Maronites, and Latins (Roman Catholics). They had lived in peace before 1974, and they could do so again, he concluded.

14. (SBU) The conference host, Archbishop Chrysostomos II, has a reputation as Cyprus as a nationalist, at least as much politician as priest. In the run-up to the conference, contacts and commentators questioned whether he was the right man to lead an interfaith dialogue. As one put it, "This is a person who's highly controversial when it comes to peace and dialogue with the Turkish Cypriots; someone who was against the start of direct talks and who suggested that if the leaders fail to reach a solution, we should close the checkpoints (between the government-controlled and Turkish Cypriot-administered areas of the island)." The Archbishop also has criticized recent efforts by the Ministry of Education to revise and update the history books in schools, which are highly ethnocentric.

15. (SBU) The Cyprus Problem bookended the conference, with Christofias and Chrysostomos using their inaugural greetings (and, in Chrysostomos' case, his final prayer as well) to call for peace in Cyprus. However, at the heart of the conference -- found in the panel discussions and breakout groups -- the Cyprus issue was very rarely discussed and instead the focus was on inter-cultural dialogue. Multiple panels took up discussions on peaceful coexistence, touching on specific conflict areas ranging from Israel/Palestine to

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Lebanon, Africa and Latin America. Other panels explored the multifaceted relationships between religions, such as Islam and Christianity and Christianity and Judaism. Panels on prayer, ecumenism, monasticism, human rights and building peace by combating poverty also took place. Most participants claimed these panels, and the conference as a whole, provided a useful, faith-based political and educational framework to promote inter-cultural dialogue.

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The Future of Iraqi Christians  
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16. (U) Visiting Embassy Vatican polchief attended the panel on "Building a Culture of Peace in Iraq." The discussion largely focused on the situation of Christians in that country. Iraqi Muslim panelists Abdul Hadi Kadhim Al-Hussaini (Secretary General of the Honored Sada Association) and Ali Khalid Sarmad (Sunni Community of Kirkuk) affirmed that Christians had a rightful place in an Arab and Islamic Iraq. Iraqi Christian panelists, including the Catholic Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk, Louis Sako, and the Catholic-Latin Archbishop of Baghdad, Jean Benjamin Sleiman, denounced extremists that fomented hate by calling Iraqi Christians "crusaders and traitors," and noted that Christianity in Iraq predated the birth of Islam. Another panelist, the President of Mandeans in Iraq and the World, Sattar Al-Hilo, complained that elements of Iraqi law discriminated against minorities. Mandaean creed forbids divorce, Al-hilo related, and many Mandeans wishing to end marriages converted to Islam to do so. Iraqi law stipulated, however, that if a head of household converted, his whole family was considered to have converted simultaneously.

17. (U) Archbishop Sleiman, also the president of Caritas Iraq, called attention to the humanitarian needs of all Iraqis. Development programs in Iraq were not comprehensive and often did not reach the poorest citizens, he argued. This was true under Saddam, and continued today, even in areas that had benefited from rapid economic growth, like Kurdistan. Most assistance projects, Sleiman added, focus on

cities rather than villages.

¶8. (SBU) Following the panel discussion, Sako told Embassy Vatican polchief that he believed Christians should not participate in the upcoming provincial elections in Iraq, to protest the small number of seats set aside to them. Sako thought this was the only way to apply pressure on electoral officials and correct the situation in the future, "as the Sunnis did in previous elections."

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Detractors Criticize High Conference Costs  
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¶9. (SBU) Critics called the cost of the conference -- reportedly near one million euros -- "excessive." Others accused the Archbishop of hosting the event solely to confer on himself a degree of international gravitas. Opposition Greek Cypriot daily "Politis" wrote, "Last year, he gave only 30,000 pounds (65,000 USD) to the victims of the Peloponnesian fires, saying he couldn't give more because the Church's money came from 'the honorable toil of the people.' Then he goes and spends one million euros for supposed religious 'leaders' and heads of countries to stay in five-star hotels. Interfaith dialogue is not a bad thing, but spending all this money was just showing off." To conference supporters, however, the substantial cost of the conference was justified. As one theologian put it, "You need to take into account the substantial result. And anyway, the money wasn't thrown away. It went back into the Cypriot economy, to the hotels and buses."

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Comment  
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¶10. (SBU) The Cyprus conference was successful in that it gathered international political leaders and personalities, influential members of the Roman Curia, Sant'Egidio members engaged in various conflict-resolution initiatives, and several thousand Sant'Egidio volunteers and sympathizers. It also offered a unique public demonstration of joint effort between leading Catholic and Orthodox organizations and clerics. While the formal plenary and panels provided a wide spectrum of views on many different topics, the greatest value of the event lay in the opportunity to network and develop informal contacts on the margins of meetings. The conference was also a platform to promote Judeo-Christian

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values and showcase them to representatives of other cultures and religions, and to educate new generations on universal values, tolerance, and peace. Next year's conference in Cracow coincides with the 70th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland and the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

¶11. (SBU) The high-profile conference on interfaith dialogue was also a welcome sight in divided Nicosia, given the history of conflict between the two communities on the island. Yet questions remain as to whether Chrysostomos was the right person to host such an event and whether the conference achieved anything for peace in Cyprus. Notably absent were Turkish Cypriot political and religious leaders, even though the Archbishop had informed the Ambassador on October 30 that he would invite them and hoped they would attend.  
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